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SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

NEA FOR BURNS/SATTERFIELD/DIBBLE;
NEA/SA/EX FOR RICHIE; DEPT FOR DS/IP/ITA; DEPT FOR
DS/IP/NEA;
DRL FOR A/S CRANER; NSC FOR ABRAMS/DANIN;
USAID FOR DCHA, DCHA/FPP, PRM FOR DEWEY/GREENE

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: KWBG PHUM PREL ASEC CASC GZ IS

SUBJECT: WB/G SITREP: PALESTINIAN TUNNELERS RESCUED ALIVE;
PALESTINIAN PRISONER RELEASE APPROVED: DECEMBER 20, 2004
(1400 HOURS LOCAL)

This is a joint ConGen Jerusalem/Embassy Tel Aviv cable.

¶1. (SBU) Summary: A total of 11 Palestinians were killed and another 49 were wounded in clashes that erupted during an IDF incursion into the Khan Yunis December 17-18 intended to stop mortar and rocket fire on Israeli and Israeli settler towns. Some 127 families (600 people) fled their homes during the IDF operation and were accommodated in two UNRWA schools in the area. When the IDF withdrew at 2200 hours December 18, a total of 44 housing units (housing 57 families or 308 people) had been destroyed, and another three (accommodating 25 people) had been heavily damaged. The families housed in the UNRWA school returned to their homes on December 19, after the IDF withdrawal. Five Palestinians reportedly killed December 17 in the collapse of a weapons smuggling tunnel along the Egyptian-Rafah border were rescued alive after having been trapped for more than 12 hours. Palestinian militants fired a total of 13 Qassam rockets at Israeli and Israeli settler towns and villages December 17-19. Two, possibly three, Israelis were lightly wounded by the rockets.

In the West Bank, a total of six Palestinians were injured, one of them seriously, during three separate clashes between Palestinians and IDF soldiers December 19 in Beituniya, near Ramallah, Tulkarem, and Halhul, near Hebron. The GOI December 19 approved the release of 170 Palestinian prisoners in accordance with an agreement made between Egypt and Israel for the release of Azzam Azzam. End Summary.

West Bank

¶2. (SBU) ATTACKS:

-- Deaths: Nil.

-- Injuries: Three Palestinians were injured during clashes with the IDF December 19 in Beituniya near Ramallah.

-- Injuries: Two Palestinians were wounded December 19 in clashes with the IDF in Tulkarem.

-- Injury: Two Palestinians December 19 stabbed and moderately wounded an Israeli in the Abu Tur neighborhood of Jerusalem. The circumstances of the incident are unclear.

-- Injury: A Palestinian was seriously wounded during clashes with the IDF December 19 in the village of Halhul north of Hebron.

¶3. (SBU) ARRESTS/SECURITY:

-- Curfew/Arrests: The IDF December 18 imposed a curfew on Qalqiliya and conducted searches in the city. The IDF arrested at least nine Palestinians during the operation.

-- Arrests: The IDF December 18 arrested 11 Palestinians in Hebron, Bethlehem, and Tulkarem. Palestinians fired shots at IDF soldiers operating in Tulkarem. There were no injuries reported from this incident.

-- Shooting: Palestinian gunmen December 18 fired on IDF soldiers operating in the Askar refugee camp near Nablus. There were no injuries reported in this incident.

-- Arrests: The IDF arrested 14 Palestinians during operations overnight December 19-20 in several localities in the West Bank, including seven arrests in the Balata refugee camp in Nablus.

-- The Israeli Border police December 20 arrested a Palestinian in possession of a knife at the Kalandia checkpoint north of Jerusalem who apparently intended to attack the Israeli border guards.

14. (SBU) DEMOLITIONS:

-- The IDF entered December 20 the village of Arraba near Jenin and blew up the homes of PIJ and al-Aqsa Martyrs, Brigades activists who are currently in Israeli custody.

15. (SBU) PALESTINIAN PRISONERS:

-- An Israeli ministerial committee headed by Prime Minister Sharon approved December 19 the release of 170 Palestinian prisoners in accordance with an agreement made between Egypt and Israel for the release of Azzam Azzam. According to press reports, 120 Fatah activists will be released along with 50 Palestinians arrested inside Israel without legal entry permits. Palestinian Authority (PA) officials criticized the prisoner release as insufficient, adding that the decision to release prisoners was not coordinated with the PA and that priority should be given to those prisoners serving lengthy sentences.

16. (SBU) POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS:

-- Hamas marked the 17th anniversary of the founding of the movement with a march December 18 through the West Bank city of Nablus. A similar march took place in Tulkarem

-- The Palestinian Authority (PA) will hold a memorial service December 21 for Yasir Arafat in Ramallah. Senior Arab officials including Egyptian Intelligence Director Omar Sulayman and the Jordanian Minister of Interior are expected to attend the observance marking the end of the 40-day mourning period since the death of Arafat.

-- Following a brief stopover in Amman for meetings with Jordanian officials, Prime Minister Abu Ala, and PLO chief Abu Mazen are expected December 20 to arrive in Ramallah.

Gaza

17. (SBU) ATTACKS:

-- Deaths/Injuries: UNRWA reported that a total of 11 Palestinians were killed and another 49 were wounded in clashes that broke out during the December 17-18 IDF incursion into the Khan Yunis refugee camp (see "Incursions/Demolitions").

-- Death: UNRWA reported that one Palestinian, reportedly affiliated of the PRC, died December 17 of wounds he sustained during the September 30 IDF incursion into the Jabaliya refugee camp.

-- Injuries: Israeli media reported that five Palestinians reportedly killed December 17 in the collapse of a weapons smuggling tunnel along the Egyptian-Rafah border, were rescued alive after having been trapped for more than 12 hours. Media reports December 18 put the number of rescued men at six, rather than the five initially reported December 17.

-- Injuries: The IDF reported that IDF soldiers shot and wounded two Palestinians December 19 near Rafah.

-- Injury: The IDF reported that IDF soldiers shot and wounded one Palestinian December 19 when they opened fire on three "Palestinian suspects" north of Khan Yunis.

-- Injuries: Israeli media reported that three Israelis were lightly injured in a December 19 Qassam rocket attack on the Israeli town of Sderot. The IDF reported two Israelis wounded in the same attack (see "Rockets/Mortars").

-- Injuries: UNRWA reported that two Palestinians, including a four-year-old girl, were injured December 18 in Rafah in exchanges of fire between IDF soldiers and Palestinian militants. A third Palestinian was injured later the same day.

-- Mortars/Rockets: The IDF reported that Palestinian militants fired a total of 13 Qassam rockets at Israeli and Israeli settler towns and villages December 17-19. Israeli media reported that three Israelis were lightly injured; the IDF reported that two Israelis were injured in the same attack (see "Injuries").

-- Mortars/Rockets: The IDF reported that Palestinian militants fired a total of ten mortar shells and two anti-tank rockets at IDF targets in the Gaza Strip December 18-19.

-- Shootings: The IDF reported that Palestinian militants launched a total of nine shooting attacks against IDF and Israeli settler targets in the Gaza Strip December 17-20.

-- Explosions: UNRWA and Israeli media reported that IAF helicopter gunships fired two rockets at what was reportedly a Hamas weapons workshop inside a house in Gaza City December 17. The house was heavily damaged, but no injuries were reported.

-- Explosions: UNRWA reported that IAF aircraft fired two missiles at an open area northeast of Shaykh Zayed City (a neighborhood of Gaza City) December 19. Israeli media reported that the rockets were targeting a Qassam rocket launcher. UNRWA reported that a group of boys had been playing in the area.

18. (SBU) INCURSIONS/DEMOLITIONS:

-- UNRWA reported that some 30 IDF tanks, APCs and bulldozers entered the southern area of Khan Yunis refugee camp December 17 in response to continued mortar and rocket fire from the Khan Yunis area into the Gush Katif settlement bloc and into Israel. The ground forces, supported by helicopter gunships and UAVs, leveled buildings and were met with fierce resistance from Palestinian militants who gathered to repel the incursion using small arms, IEDs and anti-tank rockets. At the end of the first day, a total of nine Palestinians had been killed and another 30 were injured, according to UNRWA. Some 127 families (600 people) fled their homes during the IDF operation and were accommodated in two UNRWA schools in the area. The incursion continued for a second day December 18 with IAF aircraft targeting rocket and mortar launching sites, and bulldozers destroying houses and razing fields. When the IDF withdrew at 2200 hours December 18, a total of 11 Palestinians had been killed and 49 were wounded in the two-day incursion. A total of 44 housing units (housing 57 families or 308 people) had been destroyed, and another three (accommodating 25 people) had been heavily damaged. The families housed in the UNRWA school returned to their homes on December 19, after the IDF withdrawal from the area.

19. (SBU) BORDER CROSSINGS:

-- Route Four (Salahadeen Road), the main north-south traffic artery, was open December 18-20, with a major detour at Netzarim Junction.

-- Erez Crossing was open for internationals and for a limited number of Palestinians December 17-19. No laborers were authorized entry, but a total of 38 merchants crossed into Israel December 17, none crossed on December 18, and 59 crossed into Israel on December 19.

-- The Erez Industrial Zone remained closed December 18-20.

-- Sufa Crossing was closed for Palestinian laborers December 18-20, but was open for the import of aggregates used in construction December 19. On December 20, UNRWA reported that Sufa Crossing was closed as the IDF searched for tunnels in the area.

-- Karni Terminal was open December 18-20.

-- Rafah Terminal was closed for arrivals and departures December 18-20.

-- Tel al-Sultan checkpoint was closed December 18-20. Toufah checkpoint was open for residents of al-Mowassi.

10. (SBU) POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS:

-- Israeli media reported December 17 that 11 new families had recently moved to the northern Gaza Strip settlement of Nissanit, raising the number of families living there to 304.

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